

November 26, 2003

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Local Boundary Commission

Mr. Darroll Hargraves, Chair
Local Boundary Commission
550 West Seventh Avenue, Ste. 1770
Anchorage, AK 99501-3510

Dear Mr. Hargraves:

Thank you for the invitation to respond to questions regarding school consolidation.

The interests of the public are best accommodated when we consider the best interests of the children. In the long run, educational expenditures are the single best investment we can make in the future of the State. The legislature seems to believe that the public is best served by controlling the dollars spent on education. There seems to be a feeling that consolidation will produce cost savings to the State. I doubt that this is true. Inasmuch as the foundation formula pays primarily on a per-student basis, funding to districts will be much the same, absent considerations of boroughization as a means of providing local contribution in what are now REAA's. There could be some small cost savings to the state if a consolidated district decided to combine schools and reduce the number of sites funded, but I don't believe that this would occur in very many cases. Particularly in the lower grades, most studies show that children are better served when attending schools close to home. I believe that I can safely say a vast majority of the parents on Prince of Wales Island prefer to have their children attend schools in their home communities. Closing a school which is eligible for funding as a separate site is a decision not easily reached, and should be made at the local level. The small savings realized by reducing site funding come at great expense to our children, and the State should not even consider overriding local control of this issue.

The only financial benefit of consolidation might come from elimination of the redundancies in central administration where several small districts in geographical proximity now maintain complete administrative staffs. In such cases the elimination of several major salaries could make more money available for programs and teachers.

It may be in some instances that educational programs can be expanded and enriched in schools with higher enrollments, but this issue is largely offset by the proliferation of technology-enhanced delivery of academic programs. Vocational courses, and classes which

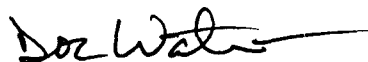
depend upon personal performance (such as music, debate, drama, etc.) may not receive the same benefits of technology, and it is possible that larger schools could benefit students who wish to enroll in these courses. However, the State has already declared that parents may enroll their children outside their home district, so forced consolidation does not largely increase opportunities for children.

In any case, I do not believe that the State should even attempt to force consolidation of individual schools. If there is to be consolidation, it should be by redefining district boundaries, and then leaving the decisions of how best to accommodate the children up to the local school board. On Prince of Wales Island, and in other parts of the State, there is a strong fear that the consolidation issue will lead to the closing of local community schools. This should not be so. No child, and no parent, should have to fear the loss of a local school which is addressing the educational needs of the child. If enrollment falls below the level for site funding, then the local school board should make the decision whether to close a school which has lost site funding.

In summary, I believe that the best interests of our children should be the only compelling argument for or against consolidation. I can see only a few small benefits in educational programs, and only in the upper grades. Local control is a compelling governance issue, and the State should not impose any consolidation legislation or regulation which dilutes local control. Cost savings to the State and to local districts would be minimal at best.

For years local districts have been attempting to plan for State-mandated boroughs and changes in district boundaries. If the State is going to make substantive changes to school district boundaries, or is going to impose mandatory boroughization, let's get it done, so that local districts can focus their efforts on making the best of the situation, rather than trying to continually provide for multiple alternatives. The uncertainty has cost us more planning time than would definitive legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Doc Waterman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Carl "Doc" Waterman
Craig City School District
School Board President